

Citation for published version:

Mondon, A 2017, 'Limiting democratic horizons to a nationalist reaction: populism, the radical right and the working class', *Javnost - The Public: Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 355-374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330085>

DOI:

[10.1080/13183222.2017.1330085](https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330085)

Publication date:

2017

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Javnost - The Public* on 2nd March 2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330085>.

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

RESEARCH ARTICLE**LIMITING DEMOCRATIC HORIZONS TO A NATIONALIST REACTION: POPULISM, THE RADICAL RIGHT AND THE WORKING CLASS****Aurelien Mondon**Senior Lecturer in PoLIS, University of Bath, UK. Email: a.mondon@bath.ac.uk

Since the 1990s, the term 'populism' has become increasingly linked to reconstructed radical right parties in Europe such as the French Front National and UKIP. Through its many uses and misuses in mainstream discourse, this association has created a mythology around such parties and their appeal to the 'people'. This development has facilitated the return of nationalism and racism to the forefront of the mainstream political discourse and simultaneously obscured the deeper causes for such a revival.

This article explores the ways in which populist hype, based on a skewed understanding of democracy as majority, has divided the 'people' along arbitrary lines, tearing communities apart at the expense of more emancipatory actions. Based predominantly on electoral analysis and discourse theory, with a particular focus on the role of abstention, the aim of this article is to examine the process through which, by way of its involuntary and constructed association with the radical right, the 'people', and the working class in particular, have become essentialised in a nationalist project, moving further away from a narrative of class struggle towards one of race struggle.

KEYWORDS: Populism; democracy; UKIP; Front National; abstention**Word count: 8,097**

Lamenting the seemingly unstoppable rise of the populist right in Europe and the return of nationalism as a key political demand have become common tropes within media commentary (Katsambekis 2015, 1). Despite many commentators foretelling their already converted readership of the dangers of such politics, so-called populist parties remain the centre of attention election after election, regularly breaking new records and sending fresh warnings to the 'establishment'. To explain this resurgence, it has thus become commonplace in the mainstream media, but also part of academia, to come across generalisations regarding the predisposition of a loosely defined 'working class' to vote for reactionary forms of nationalism and racism. In the UK, for example, as the campaign for the 2014 European election ramped up, "an impartial blog by political scientists Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin" on *The Telegraph* website introduced us to "UKIP, Britain's most working-class party" (Goodwin and Ford 2014a). In France, in the aftermath of the election, *Le Monde* (2014) titled one of its articles: "the FN obtains its best results with the young and workers" (author's translation). The situation was similar in the United States, where the working class was also blamed for Trump's victory despite polls suggesting a much more nuanced picture (Anderson 2016).

Therefore, the acknowledgement of the failings of the system to work for all has often been limited to those 'left-behind' voting for what will be defined more precisely here as populist radical right parties (PRRPs), thus shifting mainstream politics towards more nationalistic and xenophobic platforms as they have become construed as popular demands, to which mainstream politicians felt compelled to respond (Mondon 2013). Consequently, another somewhat contradictory trend has developed whereby 'the people', through the association with PRRPs, are considered no longer worthy of trust because of their assumed undemocratic predisposition (Glynos and Mondon 2016). A simplistic Tocquevillian narrative has thus become commonplace where 'we', conscientious electors, are warned about the rule of the mob, something which became clearest in the aftermath of the EU referendum in the UK.

Using the French and British cases as illustrations, this article first demonstrates that the working-class basis of the vote for parties like UKIP and the FN can be nuanced through electoral analysis and the addition of key democratic indicators. With insights from Discourse Theory, the second part explores the way in which the empty signifier of 'the people', through that of the 'working class' as the embodiment of the 'left behind', has become owned by PRRPs, through the help of mainstream elite narratives. Through this articulation, it is argued that the concept of 'the people' has been taken away from its traditional emancipatory character usually defended by the left and become the embodiment of a nationalist reactionary wave, reinforcing here the fear of the masses usually present on the right. This has been facilitated by the 'working class' being redefined in terms of race struggle instead of class struggle.

What is Populism the Name of?

Cliché as it may be, studying parties such as UKIP and the Front National remains a definitional minefield. Debates have long taken place around terminological issues, and the difficulty in gathering under one umbrella extremely varied parties and organisations. This has been further complicated by the legacy left by ideologies on the right of the right, and the attempt of reconstructed parties to distance themselves from traditional forms of extreme right politics (Rydgren 2005). The ongoing definitional challenge is probably best identified by the debate over the term 'populism', 'a notoriously elusive and slippery concept' (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), with some academics arguing it is more or less essentially ideological (see amongst others Mudde 2007, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008),

while others point to its discursive and stylistic nature (see amongst others Laclau 2005, Moffitt and Tormey 2014, Aslanidis 2015).

Drawing on the work originating from the Essex School (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), this article understands populism as necessitating the construction of ‘the people’ and its positioning in an antagonistic manner against the ‘establishment’. As an empty signifier, the concept of ‘the people’ can take on different meanings depending on who is using it and to what end. PRRPs create a ‘people’ along nationalist lines, which does not only entail the denunciation of ‘the establishment’ (in most cases the liberal elite), but also the singling out and exclusion of those who are not part of the national community (see De Cleen 2017). For parties like the FN and UKIP, the homogenous national ‘people’ finds their unity in shared ethnic and cultural characteristics akin to what Etienne Balibar has called ‘new racism’ (Balibar 1997). It is thus nativism that is core to their ideology, with populism acting as a strategic tool.

To address issues of clarity when dealing with reconstructed radical right parties, Cas Mudde (2007, 26) has developed the concept of ‘populist radical right’ parties (PRRPs), the emphasis here being placed on the words chosen, but also on their order:

In ‘radical right populism’ the primary term is populism, while ‘radical right’ functions merely to describe the ideological emphasis of this specific form of populism. Populist radical right, on the other hand, refers to a populist form of the radical right. (Mudde 2007, 30)

While Mudde’s conception of populism as a thin ideology differs from the more discursive account preferred in this article, his terminology will be used to describe parties such as the FN and UKIP, to acknowledge that while populism is indeed an essential part of their strategy, their core ideological tenets are to be found in the radical right.

While in our conceptual setting, ‘populism’ is seen as a discursive construction, whose meaning will “significantly vary depending on the ideology to which it is attached, as well as the socio-economic and historical environment in which it emerges and develops” (Katsambekis 2016, 3), the same approach is rarely taken in the mainstream analysis of PRRPs outside of academia. As Annie Collovald (Collovald 2004, 10) already noted in 2004, applying the term ‘populism’ to parties such as the FN is problematic as it is not only ‘blurrier, but also less stigmatizing than the ones it is meant to replace, such as fascism or extreme right’. It is thus not surprising to witness some of these parties adopt or at least welcome the categorisation as it provides them with a link with ‘the people’, away from their traditional association with anti-democratic politics. For example, Marine Le Pen recently chose as campaign slogan “In the name of the people” (*Au nom du peuple*) and Nigel Farage called on “the People’s army” to defeat the “anti-democratic EU” in the referendum campaign. To put it simply, the term ‘populism’ has allowed PRRPs, despite their own elitist and authoritarian background, to appropriate for themselves the concept of ‘the people’, and shift its understanding away from more emancipatory meanings found in revolutionary times, to that of the national people, based on ethnicity, a homogenous culture, and ultimately race.

While PRRPs have benefited from this and legitimised some of their ideas through their appropriation by mainstream politicians claiming to listen to ‘the people’, another seemingly contradictory trend developed. The misuse of the term ‘populism’, as Collovald pointed out, provides both legitimacy and opprobrium, depending on the objectives of the protagonist. To demonstrate this contradiction, this article focuses particularly on the assumed links between the ‘working class’ and

PRRPs (see for example Perrineau 2014, Goodwin and Ford 2014). Just like ‘the people’, which can be defined as an electoral and administrative body, an essence or through nationalistic and even racist characteristic, the working class holds various meanings, both countable and political. In the subsequent analysis of electoral data, ‘working class’ will be broadly defined according to socioeconomic status and declared revenue. In this context, the term ‘working class’ can easily be replaced by ‘ordinary people’ and ‘lower classes’ to create various political effects (see Bauman 1998, Harkins and Lugo-Ocando 2016).

Therefore, through the deconstruction of the support of the working class and ‘the people’ for PRRPs, and the acknowledgement of the role played by abstention in real democracy, the following sections on UKIP and the FN aim to illustrate that the interpretation of the rise of PRRPs leads to a dual process of legitimisation of nationalism and racism and a delegitimisation of ‘the people’ (whose politics are reduced to nationalistic demands) as democratically untrustworthy.

The British Working Class: Reactionary, Xenophobic and Drawn to Right-wing Populism?

The rise of UKIP and the so-called ‘revolt on the right’ (Goodwin and Ford 2014) have commonly been linked to the working class and their predisposition to turn to populist alternatives. Yet the claim made most forcefully by Goodwin and Ford that UKIP is ‘the most working-class party’ (Goodwin and Ford 27 January 2014) is not only misleading but potentially damaging. For one, as demonstrated below, the ‘working class’, understood in socio-economic terms, continues to vote predominantly for Labour and the Conservative. To be clear, the data surveyed in Goodwin and Ford’s research remains extremely valuable. However, some of the more popular claims inferred in their analysis provide only a partial understanding of the situation. This is even more obvious when the role of abstention, and its spread amongst the working class, is taken into account. This incomplete picture thus leads to a) a link between the party and the British working class which is at best tenuous and b) an inflation of the working-class nature of the party’s electorate. To examine these two claims further, the following analysis will be based on data from the 2015 General Election. Unfortunately, no survey data relating to the vote per social class is available for the 2014 European Elections in the UK.

Much of the discussion around the rise of UKIP has been in relation to the Eurosceptic party managing to appeal to former Labour voters, and in particular to what is usually conceived as the natural reservoir for left-wing votes: the working class. Overall, UKIP received 12.7 per cent of the vote in the 2015 General Election. As shown in table 1, a 2015 Ipsos MORI survey suggests that, while they voted predominantly for the parties most likely to win (Labour and the Conservatives), categories DE and C2, traditionally associated with the working class, were indeed those most likely to vote for UKIP.

	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Green	Other
AB	45	26	12	8	4	5
C1	41	29	8	11	4	7
C2	32	32	6	19	4	7
DE	27	41	5	17	3	7

TABLE 1: GE2015 results. Source: Ipsos MORI 2015. Social classes are taken from the National Readership Survey (2008) with A = Higher managerial, administrative and professional; B = Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional; C1 = Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional; C2 = Skilled manual workers; D = Semi-skilled and unskilled manual

workers; and E = State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only.

However, when taking abstention into account, a different picture emerges. As demonstrated by figure 1, the gap between categories DE and C2 and categories C1 and AB is much narrower once all registered voters are taken into account, as the share of the vote for UKIP becomes much less impressive in categories DE and C2 where turnout is traditionally lower than in C1 and AB. It could be expected that the gap would be further reduced if unregistered voters and foreigners, who account for a large portion of the working class, were included in decision-making. Obviously, we cannot be certain that, if forced to participate, abstainers would not vote for UKIP. However, the point here is that they do not feel compelled to do so in the present system, and this should be noted more forcefully in the analysis of results.

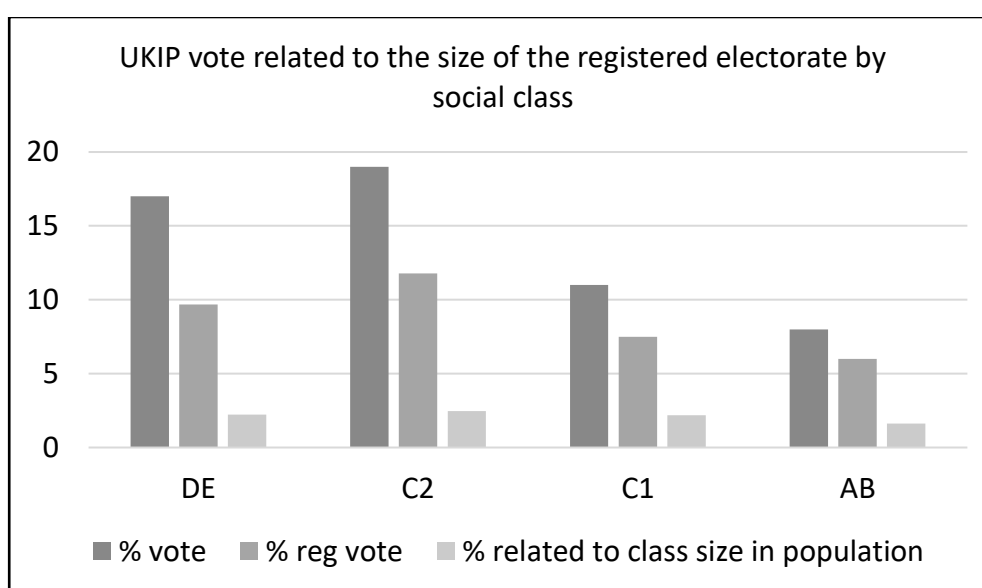


FIGURE 1: Share of Ukip vote by Social Class (NRS classification) and related to the size of the registered electorate by social class. Source: (Ipsos Mori 2015). For example: UKIP received 17% of the DE vote, 9.69% of the DE vote when abstention is taken in account and the DE vote for UKIP represented 2.23% of the entire UK registered vote.

When taking into account the size of each social class' electorate within the voting population as a whole, compared to looking simply at the percentage of voters who decided to vote for UKIP within a particular social class, claims that UKIP is the party of the working class become increasingly untenable. As shown in the third column of figure 1, when related to the electorate as a whole, the size of UKIP's DE and C2 vote amount respectively to 2.23 per cent and 2.47 per cent of the total electorate, while UKIP's C1 and AB vote amounts to 2.18 per cent and 1.62 per cent of the total electorate respectively. Therefore, when abstention and the size of respective social classes are taken into account, DE and C2 represent 55 per cent of UKIP's vote, while C1 and AB represent 45 per cent. While UKIP may have been a receptacle for part of the dissatisfied working class, almost half of its vote has come from those traditionally associated with being most well off and better educated in our society.

Further analysis of the results based on the construction of the different social classes also points to the uneasy relationship between the working class and UKIP. As Geoffrey Evans and Jonathan Mellon (2015) have demonstrated, UKIP has drawn support primarily from the Conservatives – some of whom may well have been former Labour voters, but had made their way to the right before the last election, thus not representing a direct shift from left to radical right. Furthermore, UKIP seems to have appealed to a particular kind of working class – something which is too often ignored as social class classification tends to blur boundaries between types of voters who have traditionally voted one way or another. As Evans and Mellon pointedly argued:

Working class voters are a little more likely to support UKIP than other classes, but there is stronger support among the self-employed and business owners, who were Mrs Thatcher's hard-core supporters, not Labour's. Even within the working class, the strongest UKIPers are the lower supervisory category, who are not the disadvantaged semi- and unskilled workers that have been thought to provide the core of UKIP support. (Evans and Mellon 20 April 2015)

A similar picture emerges when studying the results of the European Union referendum in 2016. Here again, the divide was often described as one where the working class and poorly educated were responsible for forcing those better off, more open-minded and better educated out of Europe. On the day, *The Daily Express* (Gutteridge 24 June 2016) went as far as talking about the 'working class revolution'. Analysis of polling data in figure 7 suggests that, while categories DE (64 per cent) and C2 (64 per cent) were indeed more likely to vote for Brexit – if they voted – than C1 (51 per cent) and AB (43 per cent), taking abstention and the size of each social class into account reveals a different picture. Even though it was first thought that the nature of the campaign might bring poorer voters back to the polling booths, subsequent analysis (Dunford and Kirk 2016) suggested that age was a more important factor with regard to turnout than social class, with areas with higher DE voters showing lower levels of participation than others. Unfortunately, the comprehensive Ashcroft poll (Lord Ashcroft 24 June 2016) following the EU referendum did not provide estimates regarding abstention per social class, nor did any other poll as far as the author is aware. As a result, in figure 3, abstention per social class was calculated on the basis of similar proportions to the 2015 General Election in relation to the total level of abstention for the EU referendum (27.8 vs 33.9 per cent). While this is clearly not ideal and demonstrates the lack of interest in taking abstention into account, it raises some interesting considerations. If patterns of abstention were indeed similar, the gap between the category most likely to vote Leave (C2 with 42.34 per cent) and that least likely (AB with 35.15 per cent) narrows from 21 per cent to just over 7 per cent. Strikingly, C1 reaches 38.25 per cent, just below DE with 39.76 per cent.¹ When a further layer is added and these percentages are compared to the share of each social class in the total population, the picture reverses, and AB (9.49 per cent) and C1 (11.12) become the largest purveyors of vote for Leave, above both C2 (9.02) and DE (9.14).

¹ While this is anecdotal for this article, such figures also dismiss the argument that Brexit represented the voice of the people against the elite, as it not only received a minority of the overall vote when abstention is taken into account, but also a minority of the vote in each social category.

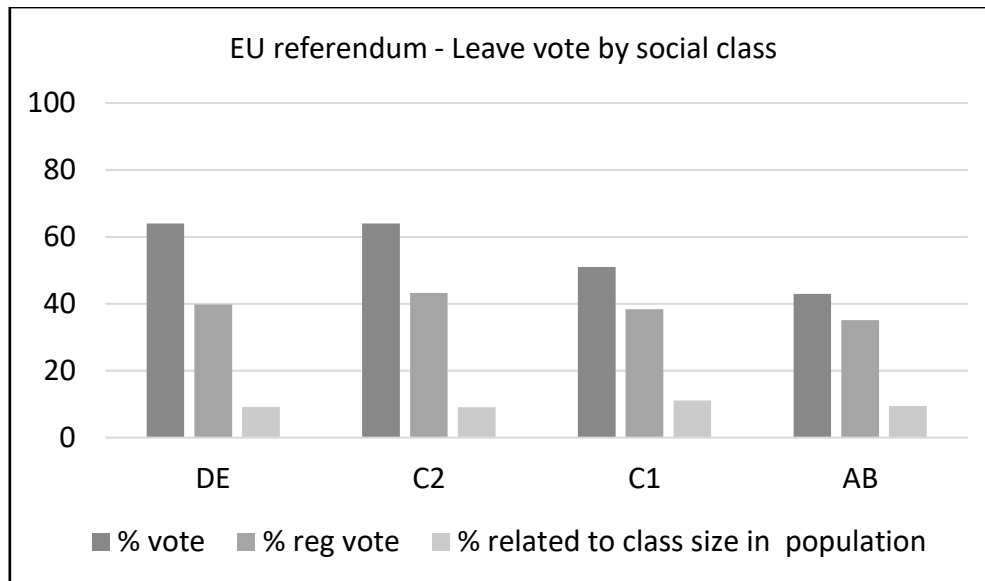


FIGURE 2: Leave vote per social class. Source (Lord Ashcroft 24 June 2016, Ipsos Mori 2015)

The Front National as *the* Working-class Party?

The French case points to some similar trends. It is common to read that the FN has taken a more social turn under Marine Le Pen's leadership. While there is no doubt that the FN has evolved in its approach to economics, away from its neo-liberal stance in the 1980s, this strategy has been more subtle, rhetorical and slower than is usually stated (see Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer 2015). Similarly, the focus on former left-wing bastions is not new, and started with Jean-Pierre Stirbois achieving the first breakthrough for the FN in 1983 in the Dreux local elections (16 per cent). Yet, much of the economic discourse emanating from the FN today does appear to be targeting the working class and the fact that the party and Marine Le Pen herself have been relatively successful, in the industrial Nord-Pas-de-Calais in particular, tends to confirm that trend.

However, as with UKIP, a closer look at surveys and the FN electorate demonstrates that the link between the working class and the FN is not as direct or strong as is often assumed, and that this disproportionate focus leads to a partial understanding of the appeal and support of the party. Nonna Mayer (2002) demonstrated early on that the role of class in the vote for the FN was murkier than expected. Contradicting the theory of *gaucho-lepénisme* (Perrineau 1997), Mayer argued that the FN did not draw its vote from former left-wing working-class members, but rather from those alienated from previous forms of political socialisation, whom she called the '*ninistes*' (neither/nors). Florent Gougou's (2014, 2015) analysis of working-class voting patterns in France demonstrates further that the shift in pattern away from the left must be taken with caution, and that while the FN benefited from this realignment, other factors must be taken into account, such as abstention and the generational divide. Gougou's (2014, 19) analysis also suggests that, as did UKIP, the FN has done better in working-class communities where the right already had a hold, whilst workers in traditionally left-wing communities appear to have chosen abstention.

The caution called for by Gougou when studying the working-class vote in France is confirmed by an analysis of surveys conducted after the 2014 European election, when the FN became the 'largest party in France'. As exemplified in figure 4, surveys suggest that the FN vote comes predominantly from voters who are part of the unemployed, worker or employee categories (37 per

cent, 43 per cent and 38 per cent respectively), compared to 20 per cent for intermediate professions and 9 per cent for the managerial class. However, when abstention is taken into account, the divide becomes much less impressive with the FN gathering 11.47 per cent of the unemployed registered vote, 15 per cent of the workers', 12.16 per cent of the employees', 8 per cent of the intermediates' and 4.23 of the managerial class's registered vote. While the FN vote in this calculation remains predominantly anchored in the broad working class, the difference between the share of the largest segment of the vote in the first calculation (34 per cent between workers and managers) is now under 11 per cent of the registered vote. Unfortunately, IPSOS make the comparison with the whole electorate inaccurate.

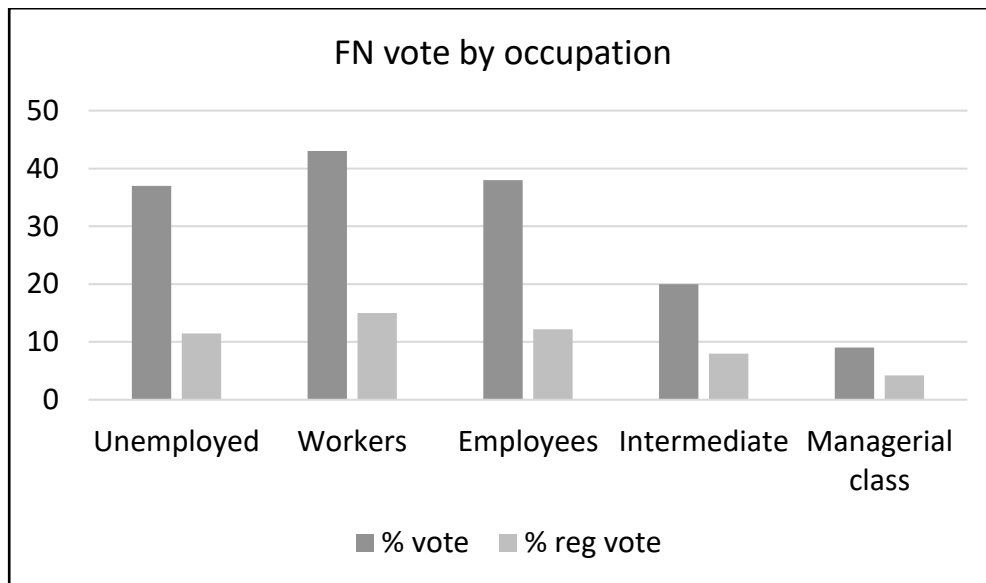


FIGURE 3: FN vote in the 2014 European Election per profession. Source: (Ipsos 2014)

However, more nuance can be added to this calculation, by taking the salary of the respondents into account. In this case, it is the middle categories of the salary range who appear to have voted predominantly for the FN, rather than the poorest. This could point to a similar trend to that highlighted by Mellon and Evans in the UK and confirmed by the research undertaken by Nonna Mayer (2015, 311-312) in France, whereby the part of the lower classes which turns to the FN is that which has something to lose (skilled workers, independents, shopkeepers etc.).

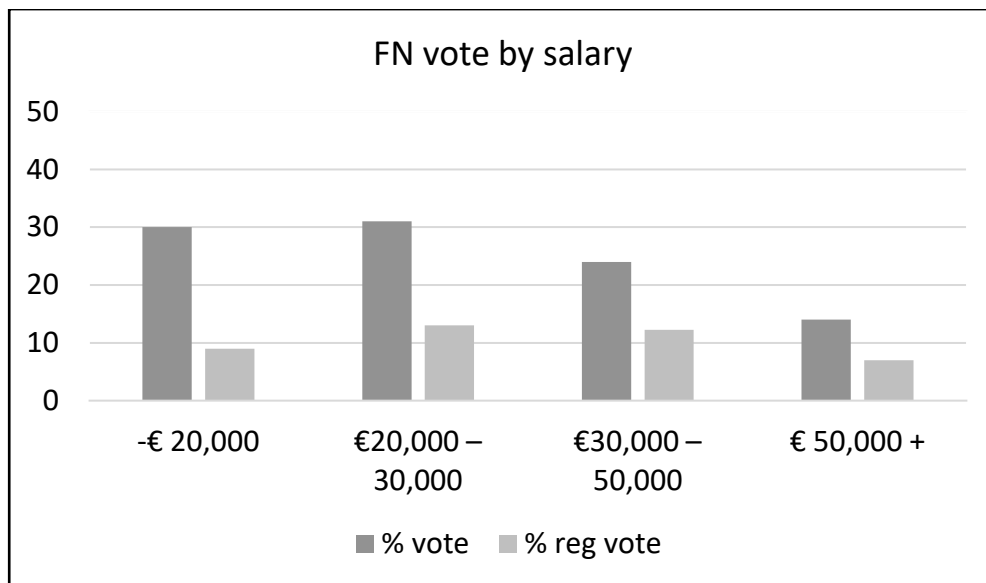


FIGURE 4: FN vote in the 2014 European Election per salary band. Source: (Ipsos 2014)

A significantly altered narrative to the FN as the party of the ‘left-behind’ thus appears, as only 9 per cent of those with the lowest revenue voted for Le Pen’s party, compared to 13.02 per cent of those earning between €20,000 and €30,000 and even 12.24 per cent for those earning between €30,000 and €50,000. The difference between the lowest and highest earners is a mere 2 per cent once registered voters (and thus abstention) are taken into account.

Of course, the aim of these two sections is not to deny that part of the working class has found comfort in voting for PRRPs, or that some may have switched from former left-wing allegiances to what would have once been considered a mortal enemy. However, bringing nuance to the vote for the so-called populist right allows us to place it back within historical and socio-economic contexts, and to highlight that this rise is only one symptom of dysfunctional liberal democracies, along with abstention and strategic voting. The following section aims to explore this incomplete picture, by focusing further on abstention and its role, or lack thereof, in the current democratic narrative.

Absent Abstention

The use of the term ‘populism’ applied to the rise of PRRPs in the mainstream media has been misleading as it has suggested not only that ‘the people’ have turned decisively towards nationalistic politics, but that they have also remained engaged in the current democratic system. Yet the inclusion of abstention and broader alienation from the system could suggest a different understanding of the current democratic crisis. In post-democratic societies (Crouch 2004; Mair 2006) increasingly defined by the alienation of voters and the growth of abstention (although one does not necessarily lead to the other), the level of turnout should be an essential element to take into account when making claims about the composition of a particular electorate. In France for example, only 42 per cent of all voters declare they vote at every election (Muxel 2012). Taking abstention into account is even more important when talking about working-class voters as they tend to abstain more (as do young people).

The widespread ignorance of the phenomenon is in part due to the difficulty to gauge abstention precisely, leading many to overlook this category of the population in their analysis of voting patterns – as the saying goes ‘your vote, your voice’. As liberal democracies have internalised the voting system as the only tool to express democratic concerns, it has been assumed that only

those taking part should be included in subsequent analysis, leaving those refusing to participate as responsible for their own sidelining in decision-making or as providing their tacit consent. Not voting is thus consistently described as a fault in our societies, something negative which is either seen as a refuge towards which powerless losers gravitate or something more sinister, a failure to uphold one's duties: after all, "people died for us to have the right to vote". As Nathan Manning and Mary Holmes (2013, 481) noted, "the idea of disengagement as a critical stance is largely ignored in key literature. Inept communities and declining participation are blamed on citizens and their supposed failures of character". Socioeconomic pressures and genuine reasons to feel disconnected from a system that simply does not work for particular groups and communities are ignored in the process (Skeggs 2004).

Strikingly, there is very little literature in the field of democratic or electoral politics that focuses on abstention. While many texts have been written recently to provide reasons why we should not be surprised that more people decide to abstain (see amongst others Brown 2011; Crouch 2004; Rancière 2005), it is much rarer to find in-depth studies examining the scale of the phenomenon and the reasons leading to abstention (see for example Muxel 2007, 2014). In 2007, in their seminal book on the topic, Cécile Braconnier and Jean-Yves Dormagen (2007) noted that only two major studies had ever been published on the French case before theirs. In the UK, no studies of such a scale appear to have been undertaken. As psephology has become an increasingly popular field of research in the Social Sciences, with a growing influence on policy making and electioneering, the neglect of abstention is clearly problematic as those not voting, whatever their reason, represent a large part of the electorate.

As demonstrated in figure 6, 7, 8 and 9, the role played by abstention is uneven, depending on the type of election (first or second order).

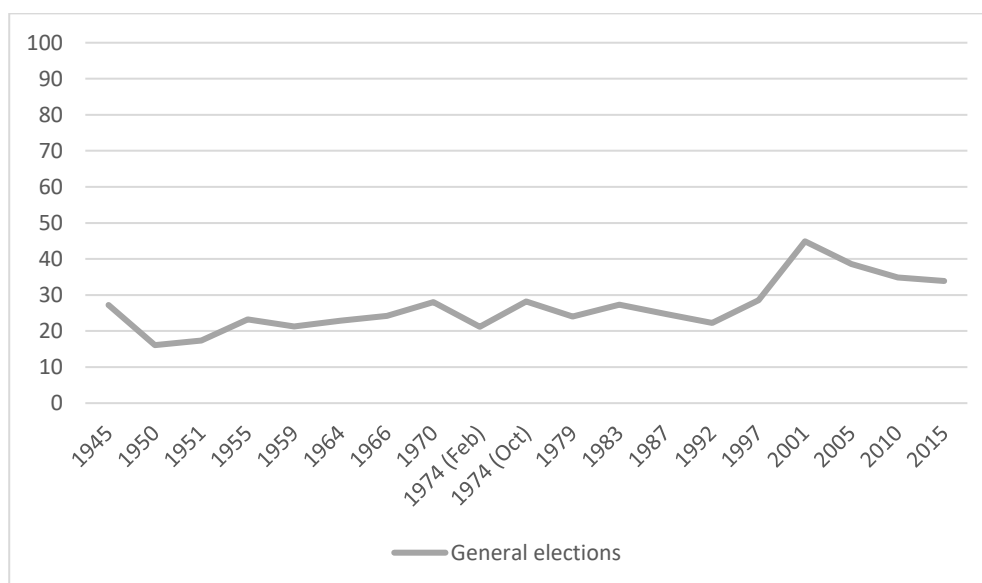


FIGURE 5: Abstention levels in general elections in the UK since 1945

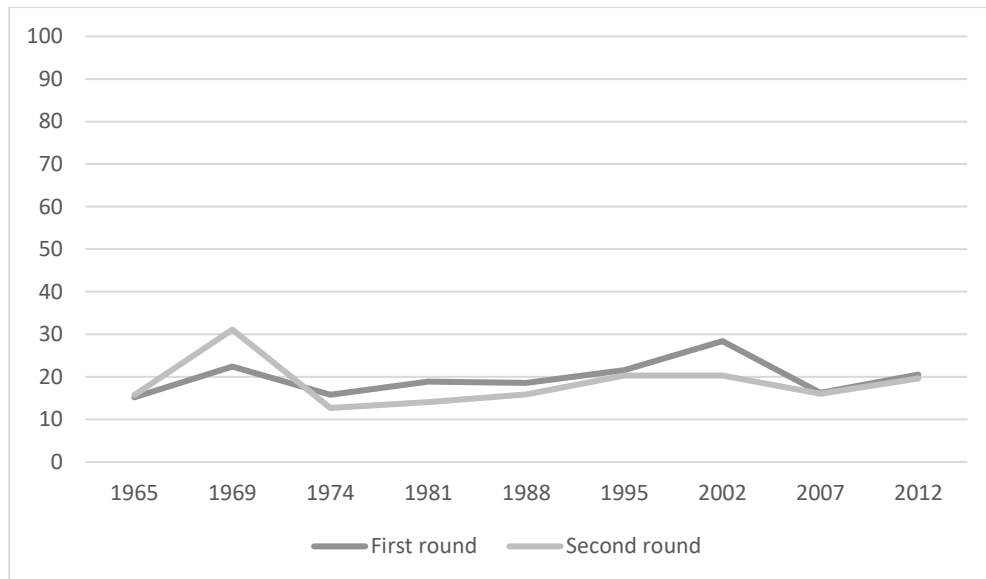


FIGURE 6: Abstention levels in French presidential elections since 1965

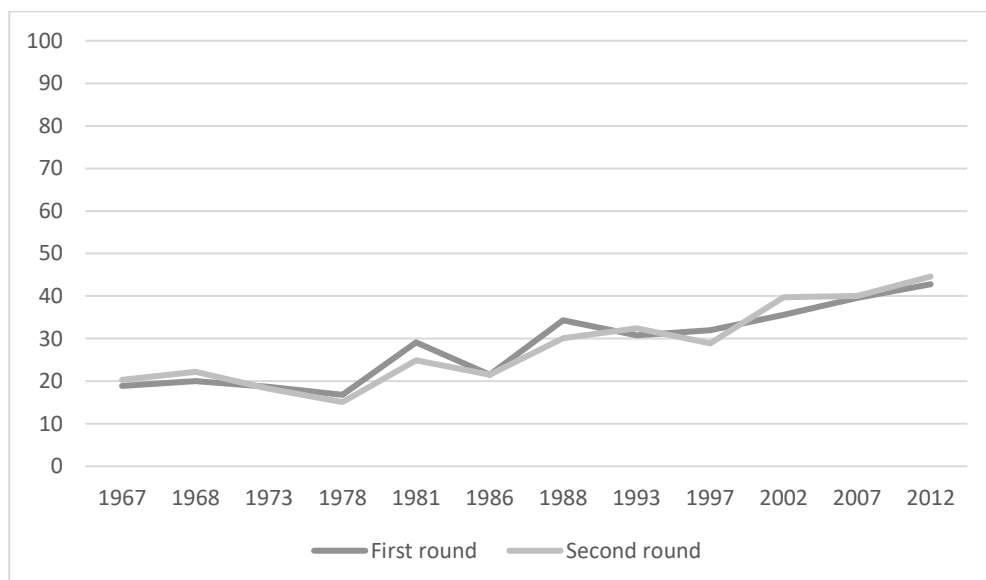


FIGURE 7: Abstention levels in French legislative elections since 1965 (note that there was only one round in the 1986 election)

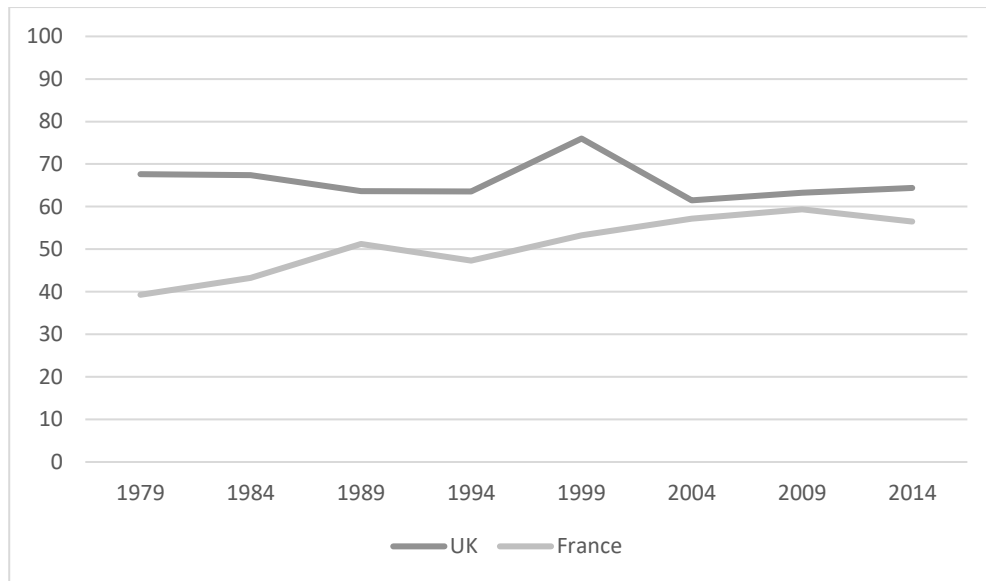


FIGURE 8: Abstention levels in European elections since 1979

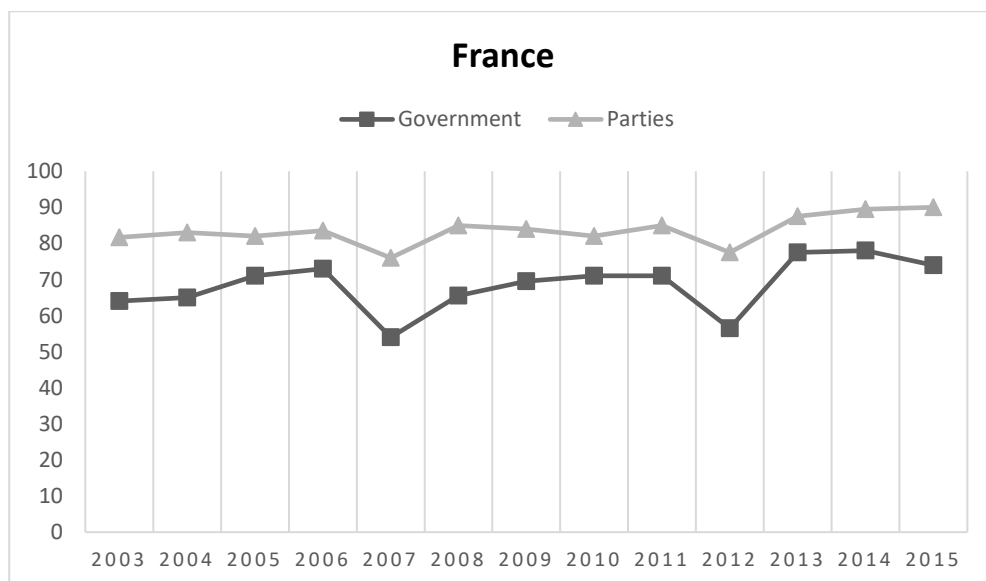
Overall, a general increase in abstention can be witnessed at the turn of the century in both France and the UK. The reaction to anomalous events, such as the 2002 presidential elections when Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round, leading to a rise in participation in the following election, appear rather short term as abstention increased again in 2012. Regardless of the trends, abstention, which includes in the best case scenario in France and the UK a fifth of the electorate, highlights the lack of unanimity at the core of universal suffrage, and thus its partially democratic nature (Crépon 2012:18). While the exploration of universal suffrage as democratic is beyond the scope of this article, the contempt in which this on-going and growing phenomenon has been held is telling. Despite its scale and plethora of political meanings, ignoring abstention or mentioning it in passing while uncritically reporting electoral results as the expression of popular sentiment or public opinion remains the norm (see Bourdieu 1973 on public opinion). After by-elections in a small town in Northern France, *Médiapart* discussed the results in this way:

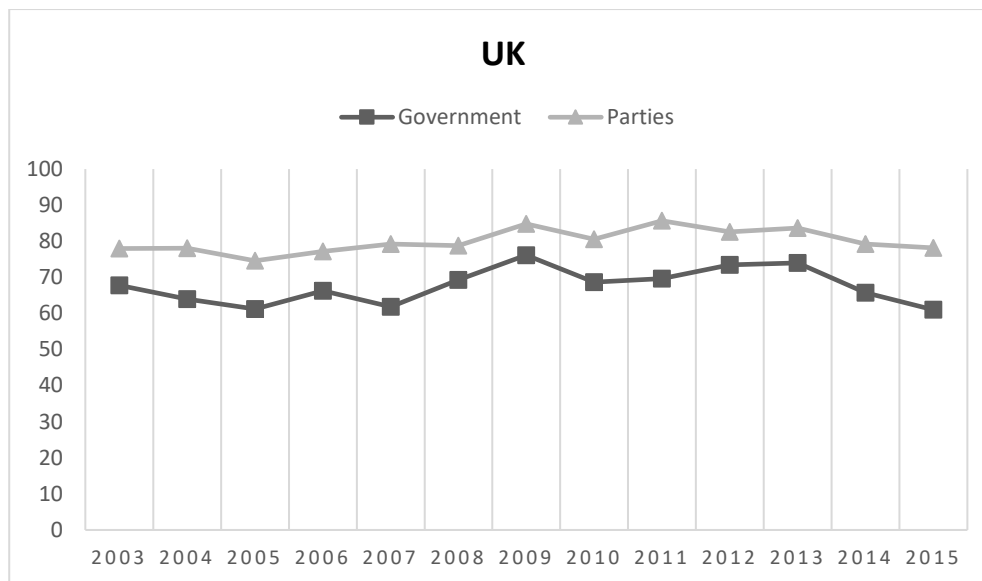
in the town which used to host ArcelorMittal smelters and was led by a socialist mayor until 2014, more than a third of the 11800 inhabitants voted FN. (Turchi 2016)

This sentence reinforced the narrative discussed in the introduction that the working class has abandoned its socialist past for the nationalist and xenophobic promises of the populist FN. However, a more precise reading of the results show a very different picture: it was not a third of the population which voted for the FN, but a third of the voters (2290 out of 6791 votes according to the municipality's website). Therefore, the FN received 'only' 20 per cent of the vote, leaving four out of five voters who decided, for whatever reason, not to cast their ballot for the radical right party. Of course, this is not to say that 20 per cent of the vote is negligible or that it does not have very real consequences as the system is based on votes rather than registered voters. While this is anecdotal evidence, that *Médiapart* and Marine Turchi, a website and journalist known for their outstanding investigative journalism in France, covered the election in such a skewed manner is symptomatic.

While some academics have dedicated their work to studying abstention and abstainers despite the difficulties, electoral results (and increasingly opinion polls) are usually taken by most academics, the media and politicians to provide us with democratic narratives. A cursory search on

Scopus indicates that since 2000, 191 documents with ‘abstention’ and ‘election’ in either the title, abstract or keywords have been published in the Social Sciences. A more precise analysis of these publications demonstrates that most relate to voting rather than non-voting (2 out of 20 dealt with non-voting in 2014, the year when most articles were published). While abstention used to be considered as tacit consent on the part of satisfied electors in the post-war era, such an assumption should deserve scrutiny in our current setting, as alienation from and distrust towards mainstream politics is endemic. As figures 10 and 11 suggest, distrust of parties and government has run rampant in both France and the UK. Since the early 2000s, the level of distrust in the government has not fallen below 54 per cent in France and 61 per cent in the UK. The picture is even more concerning regarding political parties, as the lowest level of distrust recorded is 76 per cent in France and 74 per cent in the UK. It must also be noted that those responding that they do not know are part of the remaining percentage, thus making the proportion of those who do trust the government and political parties even smaller. The high level of distrust in both countries is compounded by the fact that each has seen both centre left and centre right governments in the period studied. Despite such an ongoing trend of dissatisfaction towards mainstream politics, the discontented have not joined *en masse* the ranks of so-called populist parties, pointing to other receptacles such as abstention or non-conventional forms of politics too often ignored in the mainstream discourse.





FIGURES 10 AND 11: level of distrust in 'government' (question: 'I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?' Answer: 'Do not trust'); level of distrust in 'political parties' (question: 'I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?' Answer: 'Do not trust'); and level of distrust in 'European parliament' (question: 'please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?'. For each year when more than one poll was taken, the average is represented. (source: Eurobarometer).

Moreover, it would be a mistake to assume that those who abstain should be likened to PRR voters, as research suggests that the latter reveal "a paradoxical combination of low political trust and high political satisfaction" (Zhirkov 2014). Yet in much of academia, as in the mainstream, abstention is usually mentioned in passing, and hardly impacts on the subsequent analysis, which remains anchored on a partial reading of electoral results: whatever the level of abstention, the majority of votes decides. While there is no denying that the 'winner(s)' of elections do get to implement their politics and policies in our liberal democratic system, such an approach becomes particularly problematic when making statements about groups within society and their voting patterns, and ultimately claiming to discover what 'the people', in the *demos* sense, want. It must be noted that even analysis based on registered voters only gives us a partial picture of our society's politics as it ignores the potential choices of those unable to vote for questions of citizenship, age or legal status. The ignorance of abstention thus has two main consequences:

1. In post-democratic societies where abstention is generally high, basing electoral analysis on the total number of votes actually cast as opposed to the number of registered voters tends to exaggerate results. A striking example of this can be found in the 2002 French presidential elections, unannounced and emphatically described as a 'shock' as Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round with a record 16.86 per cent. This led to a panicked response from politicians and the media, which in turn legitimised much of the FN's discourse and its position as an alternative to the status quo (Mondon 2013). However, a different picture appears when abstention is taken into account: Le Pen's share of the registered vote in 2002 (11.66 per cent) was in fact similar to his result in 1995 (11.42 per cent), and even 1988 (11.47 per cent). Perhaps even more striking was that the level of

abstention that year almost equalled the share of the vote obtained by the main three parties in France taken together.

2. Ignoring abstention becomes even more problematic when analysing voting patterns within sections of the society. As is shown in table 2, abstention in the 2014 European elections was not evenly spread and, as is common across types of elections and countries, some categories, such as younger people and lower social classes, tend to abstain more than their older and wealthier counterparts. In France, Braconnier and Dormagen (2007, 10) found a correlation between the rate of participation in Paris and the price of real estate per square metre, demonstrating that abstention is clearly not spread equally amongst the population. This is compounded by the number of people not registered or badly registered to vote, who again are to be found predominantly in poorer areas (Braconnier and Dormagen 2007, 39-40). As was discussed previously, this is particularly important to take into account when discussing the electorate of parties such as UKIP and the FN so as not to over-emphasise particular segments of their voters. To put it simply, if 33 per cent of the manual workers that cast a ballot vote for a particular party, but 65 per cent of the manual workers abstain, then that particular party receives the vote of only one in ten manual workers. It may be the largest party for manual workers since none of them seem particularly appealing to that social class, but it is hardly *the* party of manual workers. Such a statement would be further problematised by the very nature of the working class in contemporary Europe, which is composed of many immigrants who do not have the right to vote.

	Voters	Non-voters
<i>Gender</i>		
Men	45 per cent	55 per cent
Women	41 per cent	59 per cent
<i>Social class</i>		
Self-employed	52 per cent	48 per cent
Managers	53 per cent	47 per cent
Other white collars	44 per cent	56 per cent
Manual workers	35 per cent	65 per cent
House persons	37 per cent	63 per cent
Unemployed	31 per cent	69 per cent
Retired	50 per cent	50 per cent
Students	37 per cent	63 per cent

TABLE 2. Voters and non-voters in the European Elections in 2014. Source: EU 2015

False Flags and the Consequences of a Skewed Understanding of the Rise of PRRPs

The aim of this article has been to examine the link constructed between the ‘working class’ and the so-called populist right today and to explore some of the origins and consequences of this association. Through a study of electoral and survey results in France and the UK, with a particular focus on the impact of abstention on the composition of the electorate of the FN and UKIP, the main argument put forward is that mainstream narratives used to explain the rise of the so-called populist right offer at best an incomplete version of the complexity behind the state of contemporary politics. In our post-democracies, discontentment takes many shapes and the resurgence of PRRPs is but one

of the symptoms. Perhaps more importantly though, this common incomplete approach has potential consequences which can only be introduced as further areas of research here:

1. The legitimisation of racism and so-called populist parties

The support for PRRPs is limited, and only one of the symptoms of the distrust currently facing western democracies. A disproportionate or skewed focus on so-called populist parties has led to a legitimisation of racist discourse in the name of democracy. This has allowed so-called populist politicians to portray themselves as the voice of the people, the voice of the downtrodden and the silent majority (even though they only manage to gather a minority of the registered vote (Mondon 2015)). As the nationalistic and racist agendas of PRRPs have been misconstrued as a popular demand, mainstream politicians have opportunistically tapped into this minoritarian sentiment and based campaigns on this issue, away from other major concerns for the population, which would have required systemic change. This has not been limited to the right, with social democratic parties increasingly promising a tougher approach with regard to immigration, refugees and Islam in particular (see amongst others Bush 2015, Mélenchon 2016).

2. The delegitimisation of the 'people' through the working class

In an apparently contradictory manner, the second consequence has been the singling-out of the working class and its further stigmatisation. Despite research showing that the increasing vote for PRRPs is not as simple as a transfer of working-class vote from left to right, it has become common to read about workers' intolerance and xenophobia driving the rise in nationalist and racist politics. The responsibility of the media, politicians and some academics has been ignored for the most part in the mainstream debate, as it has been assumed that elite discourse responded to demands rather than participated in creating them. In the UK, Cushion, Thomas and Ellis (2015) have demonstrated that the disproportionate coverage of UKIP in the 2014 European election (which appeared more than other parties, albeit in a negative manner) resulted in their agenda being at the centre of the political debates, and thus on voters' minds. Here again, this has not been limited to right-wing actors. Part of the left has played a part in legitimising the idea that immigration and the 'Other' have indeed become the main concerns for the working class (Mckenzie 2016).

3. The racialisation of the working class

The tenuous links between the working class and PRRPs have also naturalised the concept of a homogenous white working class suffering from the unfair competition brought about not by neo-liberal globalisation, but by the immigrant working class. However, this narrative overlooks the contingent basis upon which identity is constructed, ignoring first that many non-white working-class people are indeed nationals, but also that immigrant workers also have more in common in their exploitation and insecurity with 'autochthonous' workers, than with the elite splitting them into antagonistic camps over the nationalist empty signifier. In this logic of difference (Stavrakakis, Howarth, and Norval 2000, 11), the potential alliance of workers is disarticulated and their common grievances against the neo-liberal system are weakened as their demands become subsumed into racialised conceptions of their identities. The multitude of demands and grievances emanating from the working class in its diversity have been sidelined, as it has become solely understood in ethnic terms. This was clear in the Brexit victory, but also in the way the working class was portrayed in much of the media during the 2016 US presidential election, with many blaming it for Donald Trump's victory despite polls suggesting otherwise.

4. Abstention as a democratic variable worthy of study

It is crucial to acknowledge that abstention should not be automatically considered a motivated decision or a form of protest against a system judged to be flawed, although it can represent a form of 'negative politicisation' to express discontentment (Muxel 2012, 2014). It should not be assumed either that abstainers are immune to the radical right, as is suggested by the strong results obtained over the years by the Vlaams Blok/Belang in the Dutch-speaking North of Belgium, where voting is compulsory. Yet discarding it as a meaningful electoral indicator for this reason would be a mistake as it would assume that voters do so for well-recorded and consistent reasons, something that is far from convincing. For long, abstention was considered a sign of approval. However, in societies where discontent runs rampant, more caution is essential. The fact that those most likely to suffer the decisions made by their leaders abstain remains a serious concern and reason for further enquiry.

By highlighting the common ignorance of forms of political discontent such as abstention, this article has explored how PRRPs have been allowed to fill the empty signifier of 'the people' with their own understanding based on nationalism and racism, through the exaggeration of their electoral results by mainstream actors and their description as simply 'populist parties'. This constructed link between 'the people' as mythical bearer of democracy and the radical right has not only legitimised the politics of the latter, which have been constructed as popular demands, but has simultaneously allowed the mainstream elite to cast doubt on the democratic credentials of the *demos*. This occurs as we witness a move away from previous emancipatory conceptions of 'the people' towards a narrow nationalist understanding, whose grievances are no longer posited in terms of class struggle, but in terms of race struggle. By pretending to listen to 'the people' through the mainstreaming of PRR politics, while, at the same time, denouncing voters' irrational and even dangerous behaviour, politicians and the elite are allowed to overlook the deep systemic issues which are currently fuelling our democratic crisis (Bennett 2013).

To conclude, this article does not aim to provide a definite answer to the reasons behind the resurgence of so-called PRRPs, nor does it aim to downplay the impact these parties have had on British, French and European societies, and even in the United States with Donald Trump's election. However, it provides a series of caveats that are essential in a comprehensive approach to understanding this growing phenomenon and provide a better picture of the state of post-democratic societies in the twenty-first century.

Bibliography:

- Albertazzi, Daniele, and Duncan McDonnell. 2008. *Twenty-first century populism the spectre of Western European democracy*. Basingstoke [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anderson, Theo. 3 November 2016. "The Myth of the Trump Supporter: They Are Not Predominantly White Working Class but Rather Anxiety-Ridden Middle Class." *Alternet*.
- Aslanidis, Paris. 2015. "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective." *Political Studies*.
- Balibar, Etienne. 1997. "Y a-t-il un 'néo-racisme'?" In *Race, nation, classe; les identités ambiguës*, edited by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, 1 vol. (II-307). Paris: la Découverte.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Bennett, Joe. 2013. "Moralising class: A discourse analysis of the mainstream political response to Occupy and the August 2011 British riots." *Discourse & Society* no. 24 (1):27-45.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1973. "L'opinion publique n'existe pas." *Temps Moderne* no. 318.
- Braconnier, Céline, and Jean-Yves Dormagen. 2007. *La Démocratie de l'Abstention; Aux Origines de la Démobilisation Electorale en Milieu Populaire*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Brown, Wendy. 2011. "We are all democrats now..." In *Democracy in What State? (New Directions in Critical Theory)*, edited by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Daniel Bensaid, Wendy Brown, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Kristin Ross, Slavoj Žižek and William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bush, Stephen. 28 March 2015. "Labour's anti-immigrant mug: the worst part is, it isn't a gaffe." *New Statesman*.
- Collovald, Annie. 2004. *Le populisme du FN : un dangereux contresens, Savoir-agir*. Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Ed. du Croquant.
- Crépon, Marc. 2012. *Elections: de la démodémodé*. Paris: Hermann Editeurs.
- Crépon, Sylvain, Alexandre Dézé, and Nonna Mayer, eds. 2015. *Les faux-semblants du Front National: Sociologie d'un parti politique*. Paris: Sciences Po Les Presses.
- Crouch, Colin. 2004. *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cushion, Stephen, Richard Thomas, and Oliver Ellis. 2015. "Interpreting UKIP's 'Earthquake' in British Politics: UK Television News Coverage of the 2009 and 2014 EU Election Campaigns." *The Political Quarterly* no. 86 (2):314-322.
- De Cleen, Benjamin. Forthcoming 2017. "Populism and Nationalism" in *Handbook of Populism*, edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dunford, Daniel, and Ashley Kirk. 1 July 2016. "How did turnout affect the EU referendum result?" *The Telegraph*.
- Evans, Geoffrey, and Jonathan Mellon. 20 April 2015. "Working class votes and Conservative losses: solving the UKIP puzzle." *LSE blog*.
- Glynos, Jason, and Aurelien Mondon. 2016. "The political logic of populist hype: The case of right wing populism's 'meteoric rise' and its relation to the status quo." *Populismus working paper series* no. 4.
- Goodwin, Matthew, and Robert Ford. 27 January 2014a. "Meet UKIP, Britain's most working-class party." *The Telegraph: Ukip Watch blog*.
- Goodwin, Matthew, and Robert Ford. 2014b. *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Gougou, Florent. 2014. "Les mutations du vote ouvrier sous la Ve république." *Fondations* no. 1 (5):15-20.
- Gougou, Florent. 2015. "Les ouvriers et le vote Front national." In *Les faux-semblants du Front National: Sociologie d'un parti politique*, edited by Sylvain Crépon, Alexandre Dézé and Nonna Mayer. Paris: Sciences Po Les Presses.
- Gutteridge, Nick. 24 June 2016. "Working class revolution? Reports of huge EU referendum turnout which 'would favour Leave'." *The Express*.
- Harkins, Steven, and Jairo Lugo-Ocando. 2016. "How Malthusian ideology crept into the newsroom: British tabloids and the coverage of the 'underclass'." *Critical Discourse Studies* no. 13 (1):78-93.
- Ipsos. 2014. Elections européennes 2014: Comprendre le vote des Français. Paris: Ipsos.
- Ipsos Mori. 2015. "How Britain Voted in 2015."
- Katsambekis, Giorgos. 2015. "The Place of the People in Post-Democracy. Researching 'Antipopulism' and Post-Democracy in Crisis-Ridden Greece." *PostData* no. 19 (2):555-582.
- Katsambekis, Giorgos. 2016. "The Populist Surge in Post-Democratic Times: Theoretical and Political Challenges." *The Political Quarterly*:1-9.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On populist reason*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and socialist strategy : towards a radical democratic politics*: Verso.
- LeMonde.fr. 25 May 2014. "Le FN obtient ses meilleurs scores chez les jeunes et les ouvriers." *Le Monde*.
- Lord Ashcroft. 24 June 2016. How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why. London: Lord Ashcroft Polls.
- Mair, Peter. 2006. "Ruling the void? The Hollowing of Western Democracy." *New Left Review* no. 42:25-51.
- Manning, Nathan, and Mary Holmes. 2013. "'He's snooty 'im': exploring 'white working class' political disengagement." *Citizenship Studies* no. 17 (3-4):479-490.
- Mayer, Nonna. 2002. *Ces Français qui votent Le Pen*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Mayer, Nonna. 2015. "Le plafond de verre électoral entamé, mais pas brisé." In *Les faux-semblants du Front National: Sociologie d'un parti politique*, edited by Sylvain Crépon, Alexandre Dézé and Nonna Mayer. Paris: Sciences Po Les Presses.
- Mckenzie, Lisa. 15 June 2016. "Brexit is the only way the working class can change anything." *The Guardian*.
- Mélenchon, Jean-Luc. 25 August 2016. Mélenchon sur le burkini : "Je ne suis pas du tout persuadé que Dieu se soit préoccupé des poils et des cheveux". In *4 Vérités*, edited by Gilles Bornstein. Paris: France 2.
- Moffitt, Benjamin, and Simon Tormey. 2014. " Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style." *Political Studies* no. 62 (2):381-397.
- Mondon, Aurelien. 2013. *The mainstreaming of the Extreme Right in France and Australia: A Populist Hegemony?* Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Mondon, Aurelien. 2015. "Populism, the people and the illusion of democracy - the Front National and UKIP in a comparative context." *French Politics* no. 13 (2):141-156.
- Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Muxel, Anne. 2007. "L'abstention : déficit démocratique ou vitalité politique ?" *Pouvoirs* no. 120:43-55.

- Muxel, Anne. 2012. "L'électeur incertain." *Projet* no. 327 (2):22-28.
- Muxel, Anne. 2014. "La vague de l'abstention." *HAL*.
- Perrineau, Pascal. 1997. *Le symptôme Le Pen; radiographie des électeurs du Front national, L'Espace du politique*. Paris: Fayard.
- Perrineau, Pascal. 2014. *La France au Front*. Paris: Fayard.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2005. *La haine de la démocratie*. Paris: La fabrique éditions.
- Rubin, Mark, Nida Denson, Sue Kilpatrick, Kelly E. Matthews, Tom Stehlik, and David Zyngier. 2014. "'I Am Working-Class': Subjective Self-Definition as a Missing Measure of Social Class and Socioeconomic Status in Higher Education Research." *Educational Researcher* no. 42 (4):196-200.
- Rydgren, Jens. 2005. *Movements of exclusion : radical right-wing populism in the western world*. New York, N.Y.: Nova Science Publishers.
- Skeggs, Beverley. 2004. *Class, self, culture*. London: Routledge.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis, David Howarth, and Anita Norval, eds. 2000. *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*. Manchester University Press.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis, and Giorgos Katsambekis. 2014. "Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA." *Journal of Political Ideologies* no. 19 (2):119-142. doi: 10.1080/13569317.2014.909266.
- Turchi, Marine. 29 July 2016. "Dans les villes FN, les attentats ont conforté la banalisation de la parole raciste." *Médiapart*.
- Zhirkov, Kirill. 2014. "Nativist but not alienated: A comparative perspective on the radical right in Western Europe." *Party Politics* no. 20 (2):286-296.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I would like to thank the editors of this special issue and the reviewers for their precious feedback. I would also like extend my gratitude to colleagues who have helped me develop this argument and Giorgos Katsambekis and Aaron Winter in particular whose advice is always precious.